

SERMON TITLE: "A Dwelling Place for God"
SERMON TEXT: Ephesians 2:11-22 and 2 Samuel 7:4-13
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: July 22, 2018, at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

A number of you have asked me if I enjoyed my week in Montana. Yes, I did. I visited my mom and some other relatives, which is always good. I also attended my 40-year class reunion, which was a lot of fun. And, as part of those reunion activities, I had opportunities to enjoy some beautiful northwestern Montana scenery. Some of you have seen the picture I posted on Facebook that showed me standing with some of my classmates alongside the magnificent Kootenai River. The picture on the front of today's bulletin shows a mountain lake that some of us hiked to. Even though it's copied in black and white on the bulletin, maybe you can imagine the blue water and sky, the green trees, the grey mountain rocks, the small white patches of not-yet-melted snow, and the pink wildflower in the foreground.¹ Northwestern Montana in July is a feast for the eyes and a blessing for the soul. Yes, I enjoyed my trip up north. There is something spiritually uplifting about the wonder of creation. For a brief time, at least, I could imagine that I was visiting the dwelling place of God.

"Where exactly does God live?" has been a question ever since the beginning of humankind. Early humans presumed that God inhabited rocks and trees. Later, God's abode seemed more properly to be the sun and the stars in the heavenly realms. During the time of Moses, God instructed the priests to create the ark of the covenant, a kind of chest carried around on poles, so that the people could take God with them wherever they went. Wherever the people set up camp, the ark was placed in a tent known as the tabernacle. Even up to the time of King David, the Hebrew people frequently referred to the ark or the tabernacle tent as the place where God lived. As our scripture reading from 2 Samuel 7 indicated, once David had settled in Jerusalem, he wanted to build a temple as a permanent dwelling place for God. But God indicated a higher priority was to build up David's household, his family, and his descendants, so that they would know God was living in and among them.

This same idea comes across in the New Testament in Ephesians 2, where we read that the dwelling place for God is among the people of faith. Specifically, we see that God's home is a place where barriers between people are breaking down, a place where peace is being offered to everyone.

1—BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

In the early years of Christianity, the situation was like this. Jews had long considered themselves superior to Gentiles. Jews believed that they had been chosen by God, that they had the corner on the spiritual market. Jews believed that Gentiles were an inferior breed of people, and that they were morally corrupt. Consequently, when Jews began accepting Jesus as messiah, many Jews considered themselves to be the only possible Christians. But, very soon, along came the Apostle Paul and his gospel to the Gentiles. Paul taught that Gentiles could become Christians without having to become Jews first. Gentiles could believe in and receive the power of Christ without having to be circumcised and without having to obey many other Jewish laws. As the Holy Spirit came upon those Gentiles with power, the Jewish Christian leaders couldn't deny that God was accepting the Gentiles too.

According to Paul's teaching, Christ broke down the barriers. By his death on the cross, Christ had eliminated the cause of hostility and division between those two groups, bringing them together as one. No more would race or culture be an issue. No more would there be such a thing as spiritual insiders and outsiders. No more would there be a religious wall between those who obeyed the Jewish laws and those who didn't. Scriptural rules and human traditions about circumcision, diet, holy days, and temple sacrifices just weren't important enough to fight over or keep God's people apart. While those laws had certainly served a purpose in the past, from now on God was going to dwell among those who were coming together in spite of their differences. Since the death of Jesus on the cross, God's dwelling place would be among those who found reconciliation and peace in the redemption of Jesus Christ.

For the Gentiles, this was a gospel message of great hope. Through the grace of Jesus Christ, they could become recipients of God's salvation. Those who once were aliens and strangers now could

become citizens with the saints. With Jesus as the cornerstone, with the apostles and prophets as the foundation, and together along with the Jews, the Gentiles could be built together into a dwelling place for God.

It's ironic that what gives some people hope makes other people nervous. The message of peace and reconciliation for the Gentiles was a radically positive message. Unfortunately, many Jewish Christians did not like it. They did not want to share God's dwelling place with those of a different ethnic background. They did not want to have to give up their top spot on the spiritual hierarchy. They did not want to give up their sense of moral superiority. Or maybe they just didn't want to give up what they really, truly believed to be the correct and traditional interpretation of God's word.

But, as the Letter to the Ephesians and the various writings of the Apostle Paul spell out, the Jewish Christians couldn't keep this good news of Christ and his salvation all to themselves. If they were going to be a part of God's dwelling place, then they were going to have to open up their hearts to the Gentiles. The dwelling place of God would be built out of both kinds of people, not just one.

2—APPLICATION TODAY

This biblical truth still applies today. There is no one group that owns God or that can hold God up in their building or inside a structure of their particular rules and laws. The place where God dwells is where dividing walls are broken down, where hostility between groups is turned to peace, and where folks of all different colors, ages, races, socio-economic groups, genders, and even sexual orientations are able to reconcile themselves through the gracious love and sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. God dwells in the place where there are no strangers and aliens. God dwells where all are welcome as members of the household of God.

It probably will come as no surprise to you for me to say that I love the institution of the church. Ever since I started attending worship and Sunday School when I was in the 6th grade, I have adored all that the church is. I love the music. I love the scripture readings. I love the praying. I love the preaching, and not just my own. I love our classes and our fellowship and our mission projects. I love

giving my donations in the offering. Weirdly enough, I even love church meetings. Yes, I do! I love every aspect of the church because it has been a community of grace that has accepted me and nurtured me and given me a purpose. As much as I can see and feel God's presence in the mountains or alongside a creek or at the ocean, it has been the church that has educated me, stretched me, carried me, and focused me on God. The church is the primary place where I have found God to reside.

And, so with all my heart, I can sing the words:

I love thy kingdom, Lord, the house of thine abode,
the church our blest Redeemer saved with his own precious blood.
Beyond my highest joy I prize her heavenly ways,
Her sweet communion, solemn vows, her hymns of love and praise.²

Yes, I do love the house of God's abode. But in these days of denominational conflict over the inclusion of LGBTQ folks and others who are different from us, my heart is also sad. I fear that we are driving God away from the church. If we don't open our hearts and welcome the stranger and alien into our midst, maybe God won't be found inside these walls and among us. Maybe God will stop dwelling here. Maybe God will move somewhere else, where people are more accepting and willing to get along. By God's very nature, God will not dwell where spiritual barriers exist. God gives hope to the outsiders by breaking down the walls that divide.

It's understandable if this message of reconciliation is scary. Who among us likes chaos? We human beings need some structure. We have clung to and defended walls and boundaries because they have helped us feel secure. A sense of biblical commandment or condemnation and very strong religious tradition have kept matters clear and simple. We have trusted that principles are true because God said so, or Jesus said so, or at least some very important Christian must have said so.

We have to be careful, though, about what we think is bedrock Christian foundation. When we are so sure that a belief or behavior is mandated or prohibited by the apostles or the prophets, we should consider a cartoon I found. The cartoon shows an elderly man standing outside the church talking to a younger church member. They're looking at the cornerstone in the church foundation. The older member seems to be conveying some important church history. As he points to the base of the

building, he explains, “Very few people in the church realize this, but the cornerstone of this church is actually a fruitcake given to me by Ethel Mabeline during the Christmas of ’42.”³

Because we live in such a different place and time than the biblical writers, we sometimes misunderstand their intentions. I think if they were living today, some of them would be shocked at how we interpret their ideas. Sometimes the cornerstones upon which we build dividing walls are merely old fruitcakes that were meant as gifts of kindness between friends.

CONCLUSION

The book of Second Samuel tells us that King David wanted to build a permanent house for God. But, as the prophet Nathan informed the king, God’s priority wasn’t walls. God’s priority was people. That’s why, 1000 years later, Jesus broke down the barriers between Jews and Gentiles. That’s why the Apostle Paul and the Letter to the Ephesians proclaimed that there’s hope for all people to receive the salvation that comes not by law but by grace through Jesus Christ.

Yes, we have a strong foundation in the apostles and prophets, but it’s a foundation that can support much more diversity than we think. Yes, we are built into a holy temple, but it’s a temple with expandable walls. So let’s be a part of this. Let’s be a place where barriers are breaking down and peace is proclaimed for all types of people. Let’s be a dwelling place for God.

¹[Photo in color.](#)

²Timothy Dwight, “I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord,” 1801.

³Adapted from Cal & Rose Samra, *Mirth for the Millennium* (Waterbrook Press: Colo Springs, 1999), p. 52.